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ABSTRACT

The historic events of 1989 changed the political map of the world. Students and workers in China rose up to demand democracy. Democracy bloomed in Chile, Brazil, and other Latin American countries where freely elected governments replaced repressive rulers. Communist dictatorships in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Rumania were toppled and interim governments agreed to establish multi-party democracies, free elections, and constitutional protection of basic rights and freedoms. Each of these nations, which had lived for decades with empty promises and meaningless constitutions, must now build a new society. In order to create a durable democratic society, they must inform themselves about what constitutes a democracy, what constitutes a free society, and what institutional constraints are necessary to create a free, democratic society. Furthermore, they must teach democracy in their schools, not just as an academic study, but as a way of life that influences student life, classroom discussions, the curriculum, and methods of teaching. Even democratic societies must teach young people what democracy is, how to participate in it, and what rights and responsibilities they have as citizens. This paper discusses the concept of democracy, the types of democracies (direct, representative, and constitutional), and ways that democracy can be taught in schools. (Author/JB)

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Democracy: What It Is, How to Teach It

By Diane Ravitch

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DEMOCRACY: WHAT IT IS, HOW TO TEACH IT

By Diane Ravitch

The historic events of 1989 changed the political map of the world. To the amazement of a watching world, students and workers in China rose up to demand democracy, but were crushed by their rulers. Democracy bloomed in Chile and Brazil and in other Latin American states where freely elected governments replaced repressive rulers. The peoples of Eastern Europe, one after another, rallied to demand democracy and freedom and persisted until their leaders stepped down, and the old governing structure crumbled. Within the space of a few months in the autumn of 1989, the Communist dictatorships in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Rumania were toppled. In each country, the process of democratization was different, but in all the result was the same: the collapse of the Communist regime and the creation of an interim government which agreed to establish a multi-party democracy, free elections, and constitutional protection of basic rights and freedoms.

Nowhere was the process of political change more dramatic than in Eastern Europe, where regimes that had held total political power for forty years collapsed in months, weeks, or even days. For four decades, these regimes seemed to be all-powerful. But when the promise of external military support was removed, and when the people of these nations massed to show that the government did not have their consent, the regimes quickly fell.

In what, hopefully, will be the post-Communist era, the construction of democratic institutions will be a matter of the highest priority. Each of those nations that lived for decades with empty promises and meaningless constitutions must now build a new society. The experience of the peoples of Eastern Europe has taught them to be wary of the misuse of words; their countries called themselves "democratic republics," and their constitutions guaranteed them rights and freedoms that were nonexistent. In order to create a durable democratic society, they must inform themselves about what democracy is; what a free society is; and what institutional constraints are necessary to create a free, democratic society. Furthermore, to make their democratic institutions secure, they must teach democracy in their schools, not just as an academic study, but as a way of life that influences student life, classroom discussions, the curriculum, and methods of teaching. In short, they must develop a civics curriculum that prepares students to take an active role in the life of society.

Even democratic societies must teach young people what

democracy is, how to participate in it, and what rights and responsibilities they have as citizens. While the yearning for freedom may be universal, knowledge of how democratic institutions work must be taught and learned.

Each society has a school system that fits its political system. In an authoritarian system, the schools teach obedience and respect for authority. In a democratic political system, the schools must teach children to make decisions, to exercise leadership, to tolerate differences of opinion, to cooperate with others, and to respect the rights of others: these are some of the most important values, attitudes, and behaviors needed in a democratic society.

In order to teach democratic values and behaviors, teachers themselves must first understand the meaning of democratic society. How does a democratic society function? What is a democratic society?

The word "democracy" is used today by regimes that are not democratic in any sense. In order to provide a veneer of legitimacy for themselves, totalitarian governments use the terminology of democracy, while avoiding its substance. Many governments call themselves "peoples' democracies" even though all power is exercised by an elite group of rulers who stay in power year after year without ever holding a free and open election.

What is a democracy? Democracy is a form of government in which the citizens make political decisions by majority rule. This is called <u>direct</u> democracy, and it can be practiced only in relatively small settings. For example, a local unit of a labor union should operate democratically, by meeting as a group to choose their officers and to make decisions by majority vote.

But more common than a direct democracy is a <u>representative</u> democracy. A city of 100,000 people or a nation of 50 million people cannot assemble in one room, so the citizens must elect representatives to make political decisions. When a representative democracy operates in accordance with a constitution which limits the powers of the government and guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens, this form of government is a <u>constitutional</u> democracy. In such a society, the majority rules, and the rights of minorities are protected by law.

A democratic society is a way of life that permeates all social institutions, not just those that are part of the formal government. In a democratic society, government is only one of many institutions that coexist in a pluralistic social fabric. In a democratic society, the government does not hold all the reins of power; in fact, the powers of government are clearly defined and limited by law. In a democratic society, the rights of the individual are securely grounded in law, in

the beliefs of the people, and in the daily life of the people.

The important thing to remember about democracy is that it is a process, a way of living together and working together. It is evolutionary, not static. It requires cooperation, compromise, and tolerance among all citizens. Making it work is hard, not easy. Freedom means responsibility, not freedom from responsibility. When people govern themselves, they make many mistakes. But the democratic process guarantees that mistakes can be recognized, that changes can be made, and that the people are free to elect a new government. Neither democracy nor any other system of government can produce a perfect society. But the promise of democracy is that "We the people" can govern ourselves and can improve our standard of living while co-operating with each other within a framework of law and institutions that protect cultural and political freedom.

Democratic societies work on the assumption that no one--neither the government, nor political ideologues, nor any set of experts--has a monopoly on the truth. The democratic philosophy is pragmatic. The validity of a theory must be judged by its consequences in real life. Solutions that were right yesterday may not be right today or tomorrow. We who live in democratic societies believe that it is good to change leaders from time to time. It is healthy to air our differences in public. We distrust political dogmas. We like to tinker with ideas and machines and theories and methods. If they work, we keep tinkering. If they fail, we discard them and move on.

In politics, the essential characteristic of democratic government is that the authority of the government derives from the consent of the governed. The government exists to serve the needs of the people; the people do not exist to serve the government. In a democracy, when the people lose confidence in the government, they have the power to elect a new government. The people are citizens of the government, not its subjects.

One of the most important ways that citizens give their consent to the government is by participating in elections. Democracy requires a multi-party system, so that voters have a choice among candidates and policies. Customarily, voting is conducted by secret ballot, to protect the voter from coercion by the group in power. The right to vote belongs to all citizens, with only minor exceptions, such as children.

In a constitutional democracy, citizens share a commitment to the democratic ethic. The democratic ethic is a set of values and attitudes that is necessary for self-government. It can be defined as a sense of tolerance and cooperation, of sportsmanship and fair play. It is the spirit

that demands fair elections, in which all candidates abide by the same rules. The democratic ethic encourages candidates to argue and disagree in a spirit of civility. When the election is over, the losers accept the judgment of the voters. If the party in power loses, it turns over power peacefully. No matter who wins, both sides agree to cooperate to solve the common problems of society. The losers know that they will not lose their lives or go to jail; they know that they will have another chance to compete at the next election. It is not treasonous to disagree with the government. The democratic ethic recognizes that people can have honest differences, and that it is useful to express disagreements openly in order to consider all possible courses of action and to inform public opinion. In a democracy, disagreement and debate are a normal part of the political process.

All constitutional democracies share one important characteristic: the powers of government are limited, and the people have rights that the government cannot take away. In the United States, for example, the Constitution lists the rights that government cannot take away from its citizens, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, and the right to a fair trial. The national legislature--the Congress of the United States--is forbidden by the Constitution from making any law that denies or erodes the basic freedoms of citizens. These basic rights are not given to the people by government; these rights belong to the people and are guaranteed by the Constitution.

The government in constitutional democracies is designed so that no individual and no institution can become too powerful. For example, it is very important to have an independent judiciary, so that judges have the power to prevent the executive or the legislature from violating the rights of the people. One of the basic principles of the American democratic system is a deep suspicion of concentrated political power; the founders of the American government believed that anyone who amassed enough power would become a tyrant. They established a government that was strong enough to govern but not strong enough to usurp the rights of the people. The founders wanted the different branches of government to "check and balance" each other, with none able to amass too much power.

Democracies can fail if the government has too much power; but democracies can also fail if the government does not have enough power to govern. A democratic process is a formula for fairness, not for anarchy and inaction. Both leadership and decision-making are necessary for the success of democratic government. Every democratic parliament observes rules of order that make it possible to discuss issues thoroughly, to bring the debate to a close, and then to take

action.

In democratic societies, the state does not control or direct cultural life. Most cultural activities are organized by private associations. Everyone may participate in cultural life by joining voluntary organizations, youth groups, neighborhood groups, sports teams, trade unions, religious associations, and other freely chosen activities. Government supports cultural activites by subsidizing museums and other important cultural institutions. Such institutions, however, are administered by a private board of trustees, which raises money from many sources in addition to the government. Although they accept money from the government, the cultural institutions are private organizations. Artists, actors, dancers, and musicians do not work for the government; they are not subject to political control; in this way, artists and performers maintain their political and artistic freedom.

In democratic societies, the government does not censor the press; the government cannot select or dismiss newspaper editors. A free press provides a useful check to the power of government. Journalists and historians must not fear to express their views. When the government owns the mass media, the printing presses and the publishing houses, independent views are in danger. Thus, freedom of the press, freedom of speech and opinion are absolutely essential not only because freedom of thought and expression is good in itself, but because such freedoms offer the best means to scrutinize the actions of government, to keep the public informed, and to change bad policies by public discussion. Without the scrutiny of the free press, the government might persist in erroneous policies.

In democratic societies, newspapers, magazines, book publishers, and radio stations are independent; they are not controlled by the government. In the United States, television is also privately owned. In those instances where the government does own the state television (like the BBC in Great Britain), the government television maintains strict neutrality in domestic politics. It does not take sides. It is not the voice of the ruling party.

Another essential element of the culture of a democratic society is religious life. In a democracy, people are free to practice their religion without interference by the state. Churches and religious groups are completely independent of the government.

Education is a vital ingredient in the cultural life of all societies. Opportunity for education in a democratic society must be equally available to all. In a democratic society, all kinds of schools co-exist. Some are public schools, organized by the government; some are religious schools, organized by churches; and some are independent

organized by citizens who do not wish their children to attend either pubic or religious schools. This diversity of control is good for the cultural health of the democratic society.

In a democratic society, the schools are not a political instrument of the government. They are expected to teach children how democracy works and how to become active citizens, but they do not tell them how to vote and they do not tell them which opinions are politically correct. They are supposed to teach children to question, to think, to consider all sides of a question, and to reach their own conclusions.

Another important aspect of democratic society is the role of law. Laws are written by elected legislatures. The law is the means by which a democratic society governs itself.

In a democratic society, the law is supposed to treat every citizen as equals, regardless of race, religion, ancestry, or political opinions. There must be no special privileges for elected officials, the rich, or anyone else. Because democracy is a process, rather than a finished product, democratic societies are continually revising the law in order to correct injustices and to assure equal treatment to all.

The law provides guarantees for the citizen's civil rights and political liberties. It protects citizens from arbitrary arrest and detention; it guarantees that they will receive a hearing and legal counsel; it protects citizens from being forced to testify against themselves; it forbids unreasonable search and seizure. The citizen's rights to due process of law are carefully defined by the law, and the police and government officials are subject to the law just like everyone else.

Because the laws represent a code of behavior, they can be changed. If some people think a law is wrong, citizens can sue in court to have it voided, or they can try to persuade their representatives in the state or federal legislature to change the law.

In a democratic society, the powers of the government are limited, not only in political matters, but in economic life as well. The government of a free society intervenes in economic life, but does not attempt to control it. The free society has a free-market economy, where most decisions are made by private citizens, not by a government bureaucracy. Centrally planned economies are inefficient and wasteful; they are characterized by shortages and by bureaucratic snafus.

The economy of the United States is not a pure free-market system. It is a mixture of government-involvement and private markets.

The government provides services; it does not own industries or farms or businesses. Most of the economy in the United States is privately owned. Most stores and restaurants

and small businesses are owned by individuals. Most major businesses and industries are owned by corporations, which in turn are owned by many thousands and millions of stockholders. Union pension funds, for example, own a significant share of America's biggest businesses.

In accordance with the principles of supply and demand, businesses succeed or fail according to whether they offer a service or product that consumers want. If a restaurant serves bad food, customers will go elsewhere and the restaurant will go out of business. If a store sells products of poor quality, the customers will shop elsewhere and the store will fail. Good businesses succeed, and bad businesses do not. The average American consumer has many choices among goods and services that he can afford.

Government intervention helps to modify the market system in many ways. The federal government provides unemployment insurance to workers who lose their jobs; technical assistance to businesses that need help; loans to small businesses; emergency funds to farmers whose crops are ruined by bad weather; insurance for bank deposits; social security payments and medical insurance for the elderly; financial support for the poor. The government uses tax reduction policies to encourage economic development or public housing or other valuable social goals.

The federal government is responsible for keeping the economy sound and healthy and for assuring a good standard of living for the people. It does this through its tax policies, its budget policies, and its regulation of credit rates. This is called macroeconomic policy. By adjusting taxes and interest rates and spending, the federal government can change inflation, unemployment rates, and consumer spending.

State and local governments are responsible for police, firemen, roads, bridges, schools, sanitation, and other direct services.

For workers, the trade union movement has been a source of strength in the American economic system. Without a union, workers could be hired and fired whenever the owners wished. The union bargains with employers on behalf of the workers. Unions are independent of the government. They owe their allegiance only to the workers, not to employers nor the government.

In the American experience, this mixture of checks and balances has worked well: the profit motive stimulates manufacturers and farmers to produce what consumers want, the government regulates economic conditions to prevent extreme fluctuations, and the unions protect the rights of workers.

These are some of the principles and practices that are characteristic of life in a democratic society today. How can educators teach democracy in the schools?

There are many different approaches, all of which teach students to take an active role as citizens of a democratic society.

The first and most important civics lesson for all students is to learn about their government. They must understand how the government functions. They need to know how leaders are chosen, how policies are made, and how citizens can influence their national and local governments. They must be informed about the political situation and have full opportunity to discuss what is happening and to express their opinions. If you expect them to take their role as citizens seriously, then you must let them know what their rights and responsibilities are. You must show your students how they as citizens can make a difference by thinking, speaking, and acting.

One useful way to teach children about government is to invite government officials to visit the classroom and to answer students' questions. Such interviews teach students how government actually works and how decisions are made. Candidates who are running for office should be invited to meet with students and to present their views. Students should expect to ask questions of the candidates and officials. This helps students learn about the issues.

Activities in school must be planned so that students directly experience the give-and-take of the democratic process. One of the most effective means of teaching the democratic process is to create a student council. Usually, a student council is composed of one representative from each class of students. In addition, each grade or form should elect a president and vice-president, who also participate in the student council. The student council then meets regularly, perhaps weekly. Its officers should be elected by the entire student body. About once each month, the student council should report to the entire student body, to let them know what the student council is doing and to solicit their views. The student council should have responsibilities for student activities. Its representatives should meet regularly with administrators of the school to discuss the issues and problems that concern students.

Participation in student government is very important as a training ground for the democratic process. It helps to develop leaders among students. It teaches the leaders to listen to all shades of opinion. It teaches them the importance of having impartial rules and of keeping a record of their discussions. It teaches them to win without being arrogant and dictatorial, and to lose without fearing that they will be crushed or destroyed. It teaches them to be sensitive to the needs of others. It teaches them how to work with others to get something done. Through this model, they

learn about compromise and cooperation and tolerance, all of which are vital for the success of democracy in political life.

Another important way to teach democracy to students is through extracurricular activities that are organized around student interests. Whether clubs, teams, and youth groups meet during school or after school, they should be run by students with direct responsibility to select their leaders and to make important decisions. For example, students should elect their leaders and manage the student newspaper, the school yearbook, a theatre group, Boys Scouts and Girl Scouts, photography club, computer club, and other clubs that encourage student interests.

Democratic methods can also be taught by creating a model of the democratic process at work: for example, students from many different schools can participate in a model United Nations, debating the issues that come before that body. Students in a city or region can participate in a model Parliament, debating the political issues of the nation. Every democratic governmental institution can be reproduced in the school, to teach students how they work and how to participate in them.

In their own classes, students should regularly participate in elections to decide the most ordinary questions of classroom life, such as whether the class will go on an excursion or how to celebrate a holiday. They should select student leaders for class activities and responsibilities. The students should learn that their opinion counts. They should learn to think about alternative courses of action; those with differing views should present them; and the class should vote.

Teachers can encourage democratic behaviors by their teaching methods. Several years ago, I visited classrooms and universities in Eastern Europe and talked about American education. I was astonished to discover that students were unwilling to ask questions; they thought that it was improper; they had been taught to listen, not to ask questions.

Students must learn that it is good to ask questions. It is an excellent way to gain information or to clear up one's confusion. Teachers should encourage students to ask questions. Teachers should never be authoritarian or dogmatic. As a matter of course, they should intersperse their lessons with questions to the students: "What do you think? Why did that happen? What does this mean? Does anyone have a different explanation? Is there another point of view that we should consider?" In education, questioning is the beginning of wisdom.

Teachers must teach their students that textbooks are fallible, that experts disagree; that the leading historians,

scientists and literary critics continually argue over interpretations and meanings. The mark of good teaching should be the teacher's ability to engage students in discussions and to make them think. Students should not be afraid to ask questions and to express their opinion. They should be encouraged to do so. In classroom discussions, students learn to organize their thoughts, to respect different points of view, and to weigh evidence. But just as students must learn to argue forcefully for their views, they must also learn to listen, to have an open mind, and to learn from others.

Another valuable pedagogical technique for teaching democratic behaviors and skills is to introduce debate into the classroom. Students should debate a current topic of importance in the nation or the local community. By debating, students learn to take an active interest in public affairs, to express their opinions, and to shake hands in a friendly fashion when the debate ends.

Another way to teach democracy is to organize the history-social studies curriculum around the theme of the rise of democratic ideas in the western world. Students should explore the development of concepts such as individual rights, liberty, equality, and justice through such developments as the English Magna Carta and common law, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, the emergence of universal suffrage and the evolution of democratic governments in the last century.

But it is equally important for students to study their nation's pursuit of democracy and freedom throughout its history. They should understand the conditions that obstructed the prospects for democracy in the past. They should be familiar with past efforts to establish freedom, independence, and democracy.

A useful pedagogical approach to the teaching of democratic values in the early grades is to read and discuss the stories of national heroes, of men and women who led the battle for freedom and democracy, both long ago and at the present time. Young children respond especially well to stories of courageous men and women; well-written stories translate large issues into terms which young children can understand.

Another means of encouraging democratic values is the community research study. In a democratic society, citizens must be knowledgeable about the problems of their society and prepared to participate in finding solutions for them. They must learn that if they inform themselves, their ideas have merit; they must learn also how to take responsible action. For these reasons, young people should be encouraged to study a significant problem of their choosing, such as air pollution, health care, care of the elderly, or sanitation. Students should learn how to interview people, how to gather data, how to analyze alternative proposals, and how to reach

their own conclusions. They should find out which government agency is responsible and whether there are any groups trying to make changes. The best way to learn how the local government works is to actually get involved in understanding a specific local issue.

To move from research to action should be another goal in teaching democratic values. This can be done by encouraging students to become involved in community service. They can spend a few hours each week working in a public agency, helping others, such as caring for old people or tutoring younger children. Wherever there is a social need, there will be an opportunity for community service, which will call upon the energies of students and enable them to be active and contributing citizens.

In shaping a democratic civics curriculum, teachers should ask themselves, What is the role of the citizen in a democracy? Which values, attitudes, and behaviors should we encourage in the school in order to encourage a democratic way of thinking and acting?

The pedagogy of the civics curriculum is based on the role of the citizen. In a democracy, the citizen is expected to be a decision-maker and an actor. He or she must be prepared to think about issues and to play an active, responsible part in civic life and political affairs.

A democratic society may seem very complicated, since there is no single source of authority, no central planning organization, no party or Central Committee to tell everyone else what to do.

And yet it works. It works because the government can function only so long as it has the confidence of the people. The government must be the voice of the people, not their boss. It represents the people's wishes and their aspirations for a better life. A democratic government makes mistakes. It is inevitable, since none of us is omniscient. But the mechanism of democratic politics provides a way to recognize mistakes and to change course. And if necessary to change leaders.

Schools can make an important contribution to the progress of democracy by teaching youngsters the values, attitudes, and behaviors of a democratic society. Once they have had the experience of thinking for themselves, choosing their leaders, changing their leaders, and making decisions, they will quickly understand the way democracy works. People usually know their own needs better than planners do.

Sidney Hook, a great American political philosopher, wrote an article many years ago about "Bread and Freedom." He said that some people claim that bread is more important than freedom. He predicted that those who gave up their freedom were likely to end up without either bread or freedom.

The promise of the global democratic revolution, which achieved such dramatic success in 1989, is that societies that choose democracy will have both bread and freedom.